



Living Healthy Working Well

When Cancer Touches Your Family

When a member of your family is diagnosed with cancer, family life can suddenly change. Insecurity and fear may emerge regardless of how close-knit or stable a family is. At a time like this, it's important to think about the needs of every family member as well as the person suffering from cancer. Each family member will need time to adjust to the news. One family member may come to terms quickly with what's happening while another may remain in denial. Older children may be angry, frustrated, and confused while younger children may not understand the situation at all. Make no mistake, when one family member has cancer, the entire family is affected. Below are some thoughts to consider if your family has been touched by cancer.

Communicate openly and honestly.

Encourage family members to discuss their feelings, and be ready to listen when others want to talk. Idle conversation and nervousness may be signs that a family member is ready to discuss what's on his or her mind. Do not deny the reality of the cancer diagnosis once confirmed. Blanket statements like, "It's okay" and "Everything will be all right" may keep family members from expressing their fears and feelings about the cancer. It may also cause your loved one with cancer

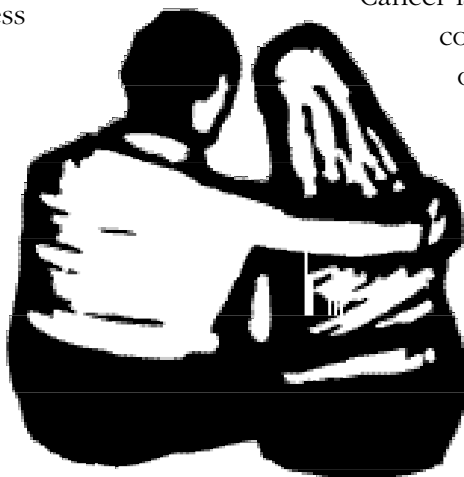
to withdraw from accepting family support, which is a critical component to getting better. Family members should be both optimistic and realistic. There will be good days and bad days. An honest and open dialogue will help your family make the most of whatever each day brings.

Try to level out the emotional roller coaster.

Learning that a family member has cancer can bring on a wide range of emotions. Family members may lash out at each other out of anger, fear, and feelings of helplessness. Not everyone may share the same opinion about how to handle a situation and disagreements may arise. Try to keep unproductive arguments in check. It's overwhelming enough for your loved one to deal with his or her diagnosis without having to be the family go-between. Realize that emotions are volatile, so take time to sort things out before saying something you may regret.

Learn all you can about the illness.

Cancer is a complicated illness, and it is common for family members to feel like outsiders during the treatment process. The more you know, the less you have to fear. The Internet is a great resource for information. Logon to sites such as the American Cancer Society at www.cancer.org and the National Cancer Institute at www.cancer.gov. Don't be afraid to ask the doctor questions. If your loved one agrees, get



involved with his or her treatment regimen. Family support is critical to the speed and completeness of recovery.

Family members' roles may change.

When someone in your family is diagnosed with cancer, family members may find themselves in new and unfamiliar roles. A spouse may become the sole breadwinner and homemaker. The head of the household may now be a dependent. Teenagers may be asked to assume major responsibilities. Everyone will need to take on extra duties. This can be stressful, not only because you are doing something new, but also because it adds to the realization that things aren't the same at home and may never be again. Be aware of everyone's tolerance levels during this time. A little patience can go a long way.

Show your support both emotionally and tangibly.

While it's important to be available to listen and to talk to your loved one, it's also important to help out whenever you can. Cancer and its treatment are physically exhausting. Vacuuming or doing the dishes may be beyond what your loved one is capable of doing. Offer to mow the lawn or wash the car. A basket of clean laundry may lift your loved one's spirits more than you realize. After a day of treatment, cooking may be the last thing on your loved one's mind. Offer to prepare a simple meal. Everyone—especially the person fighting cancer—needs to eat. If your budget allows, you may consider getting outside help either on a temporary or permanent basis. For some people, *showing* you care comes easier than saying it. Take some of the daily tasks off the shoulders of your loved one. It will do wonders for you both.



Be mindful of the children.

Children may have difficulty coping with the fact that a family member has cancer, especially if it is a parent. The parent may be away at the hospital for long periods of time or he or she may be at home in bed, in obvious pain and discomfort. Cancer can cause changes in a person's physical appearance and this can be unsettling to children. Children may be asked to do things they wouldn't normally do such as play quietly or help around the house. And, harder still, they may be asked to try to understand things they cannot truly comprehend. It is important to spend extra time with children during this time. Children find comfort and security in keeping a routine. If you are unable to give them the time they need, consider asking a family friend or close relative to devote some time to the children. The friend or relative can give the children a break from the adult world by doing things like taking them to the park, seeing a movie, helping them with homework, and showing support at after school games and events.

Remember . . .

Your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is available to you and your eligible dependents. EAP counselors are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, to discuss your concerns and provide confidential assistance at no cost to you. Just call us at 1-800-6-EAP-4-CA (1-800-632-7422). If you are using a TTY, please call 1-800-542-2833.

You can also access the EAP newsletter on the Internet. Just go to the following address:
<http://www.dpa.ca.gov/benefits/other/eap/news/wrkgsell.htm>